

Tape Recorders, Role-Plays, and Turn-Taking in Large EFL Listening and Speaking Classes

By Xiao Haozhang

In the present EFL classroom, the teaching of listening and speaking relies heavily on the use of the language lab or tape-recorders. It is generally agreed in China that the main reason for this is that most EFL teachers are non-native English speakers and thus may lack proficiency in English. However, in the classroom in which the tape recorder is used frequently there are some common problems. For instance, teachers may just manipulate the "machine," supplemented by a few comprehension questions after the students listen to the aural material. This can hinder the intrinsic motivation of students. How much do students take in when they are faced with "machines"? Normally, most of the teacher-posed questions are answered by the better students. Meanwhile, the majority of students just remain silent and listen. Some may even feel bored and sleepy. In such cases, how can we motivate all the students in the class to participate actively in the listening lesson?

Unlike the listening classroom, native English speakers have been invited in recent years to teach speaking. These teachers have made the speaking classroom more lively and have helped more fluent student speakers. Yet we find that many students speak as poorly, if not worse, than those we taught years ago. To find out why, we observed the lessons taught by the native English teacher. After a few observations of the same class, we realized that only the better students took the opportunities to talk in group work. And usually it was these students who spoke for most of the discussion time. These students were able to monopolize discussions for the following reasons:

- The large size of the class: This makes it difficult for the teacher to control the whole class in group work and to get feedback from all the students.
- Affective factors: Some extroverted students tend to be talkative and learn better in oral work, while the introverted ones remain quiet.
- Lack of interesting authentic materials: Listening materials in China depend to a large extent on the textbook. Even teachers who are very proficient in English are not encouraged to make tapes of their own for the students.

Implementing Aural Tapes and Turn-taking

In order to enhance the speaking competence of our students in the oral communication classroom, students must have sufficient comprehensible language input, most often through language tapes. At the same time, language learning must be linked to meaningful language use

on the part of the learner in the communicative classroom. The language learning experience must involve the expression of the learner's opinions and thoughts as s/he negotiates interactively with other classmates and with the teacher.

Here personal investment is crucial. Some students in the classroom do not take the opportunity to speak in group work or to respond actively after listening, partly because of a lack of roles to play or turns to take and partly because of affective factors. One of the major obstacles in learning to speak is "the anxiety generated over the risks of blurting things out that are wrong, stupid or incomprehensible" (Brown 1994b: 255). The language ego here makes some students fearful of being judged or teased by others. Some anxiety, however, is needed because it contributes to learning in the classroom (Brown 1994a). The techniques here-implementing turn-taking with the help of tape-recorders-can be very effective and practical for the teaching of both listening and speaking. They can be achieved best by integrating listening and speaking.

The Teaching of Listening

Focusing on listening is particularly advantageous in large classes. Through proper speaking activities, such as teacher-student interactions and student-student interactions, we can get immediate feedback from the students and at the same time motivate them to listen more attentively. How can we integrate listening with speaking with every student involved in a large class? The following are the proposed procedures (for intermediate level) in the listening classroom.

Pre-listening: Activity 1

Warmup questions: This activity can be done as pair work in quasi-communicative activities, the goal of which is to relate students' prior knowledge (schemata) to the message they will listen to. In this case, students may lower their affective filters, and have their respective turns to speak.

While-listening: Activity 2

After students listen to the message once or twice, the teacher may use pauses and ask questions (using both bottom-up and top-down skills). Before asking questions, however, it is better for the teacher to tell the students that everybody will be asked to respond. In this way, the students will listen more attentively.

Activity 3

Teacher-led evaluation and self/peer evaluation can be done with the help of tape recorders or through the integration of the language skills, as described below.

(a) The teacher asks listening comprehension questions one after another; all the students answer them respectively through student microphones and simultaneously record their responses with student tape recorders. Then, the teacher can ask any student (through teacher-to-individual student calls) to play his/her tape to the class so that other students will not know who answered the question. Then, teacher-led evaluations and self/pair evaluations follow. In this manner, students learn in an uncompetitive situation, and thus lower their affective filters. Moreover, every student in a large class can get a chance to practice.

(b) Self/pair evaluation can be done through the integration of listening with writing. Some forms or blanks can be made beforehand by the teacher for the students to fill in after they listen to the tape several times. And then, ask the students to check the answers in pairs with the help of the teacher's feedback or correction.

Post-listening: Activity 4

Role-plays: Ask students to take roles in listening to conversations or dialogues. Role-playing one of the speakers makes students listen more attentively to the speaker they will play. These role-plays can be practiced in pairs or groups. Such speaking performance after listening can be done in class, if time permits, or after class as homework, as required later in the sample task for a speaking class.

The Teaching of Speaking

In contrast to the listening class, the focus of teaching speaking, of course, is to improve the oral production of the students. Therefore, language teaching activities in the classroom should aim at maximizing individual language use. This requires the teacher not only to create a warm and humanistic classroom atmosphere, but also to provide each student with a turn to speak or a role to play. Pair work and group work, therefore, are often implemented in the oral communication class. Communicative language teaching, however, does not merely mean pair/group work. Since learning and communication strategies form one of the components of communicative competence, we should spend more time teaching speaking strategies, or communication strategies which are normally ignored by EFL teachers. Our students need to learn not only linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge but also how to use speaking strategies to keep conversations going.

In large EFL speaking classes, pair work and group work are often difficult to carry out effectively due to affective factors and problems of logistics. Here too, tape-recorders and role-plays come to our aid. First, we can use tapes to warm up or promote students' pair discussion through songs, music, or sounds like whistling winds, breaking waves, and so forth. Then, we can use role-plays in class to enable each student to speak. Generally, there is insufficient time for each group in a big class to present their role-plays to the whole class. Homework, therefore, should be assigned, as shown below.

Here are some guidelines for lesson planning, aimed at solving the aforementioned problem in our large EFL speaking class:

- Present and explain the speaking strategies.
- In a large EFL class, speaking strategies, such as asking for clarification and using fillers in order to gain time to process, etc., can first be introduced to the students by exemplification. These strategies should be related to the topic to be discussed in class.
- Provide a topic that engages the interest of the group and is educationally enriching. Design a group task that involves some degree of discussion and uses the strategies presented and explained by the teacher related to the topic.
- Consider and specify the role each participant of the group can play in the group discussion. Clear specifications are useful in avoiding problems, such as uneven participation.
- Specify the time allotted for group discussion and presentation of group views to the class.
- Provide adequate help to the students in the form of information, guidelines, or vocabulary prior to or during the group discussion.
- Employ the following homework procedure: (a) A task implementing the above guidance should be given as homework to the students; (b) The oral group task should encourage the use of authentic language in meaningful contexts; (c) Each group will record the oral work of its members and submit the tape signed with their names to the teacher for assessment; (d) The teacher gives feedback to the students and plays selected tapes to the class.

The following is a sample of instructions for such a task.

Instructions: In the subsequent task you may use the following speaking strategies: description, and fillers, such as *well, er, you know*, etc., to gain time to process your thoughts-just do not let yourself stop.

Such strategies are divided into two kinds. One is based on the native language, such as *borrowing, literal translation, and coining*; the other is based on the target language, including *use of a general word, approximation, description, word coinage, appeal for assistance*, etc. (Cohen 1990).

In your group, suppose that you are members of a scholarship selection committee that is responsible for interviewing and choosing one candidate to receive a scholarship for a postgraduate degree in business administration in the USA. Each person in the group represents one of the following:

- a university lecturer representing the college;
- a bank officer representing the bank that finances the scholarship;
- a Chinese government official who recommended the candidates;
- a Chinese businessman who is the future employer.

Candidate One

Wu Fang is 40 years old and has been working with the trade company for ten years. Before that he taught in a middle school in the rural areas. He is physically fit and once trained in martial arts for competitions. He has traveled widely. He has an 18 year-old son who is a college student now. He likes business very much.

Candidate Two

Li Ping is 27 years old and is a translator in a joint venture company in Beijing. He graduated from the Beijing Foreign Language Institute, where he obtained an MA. He has an excellent academic record. He is single and lives with his parents. His parents took care of him when he was very sickly in the university. He is still staying with them to take care of them because both of them are in poor health.

Candidate Three

Tong Xi is supervisor of a department in a joint venture company. She was initially a foreign language teacher in a college. She left teaching to start a small business in Shanghai. She sells ladies' garments and started a small factory with a group of friends. She is divorced and has an eight-year old daughter. Her parents do not live with her as they are more accustomed to country life in Jiang Xi Province.

Conclusion

The program we designed has improved the teaching of oral communication in our large EFL classes. It has the following advantages: (a) It capitalizes on the natural link between listening and speaking; (b) It focuses on both language-based accuracy and message-based fluency, interaction, and meaning; (c) It encourages the use of authentic language in meaningful and less competitive contexts; (d) It provides appropriate feedback and correction; (e) It gives students opportunities to initiate oral communication; (f) It encourages the development of speaking strategies; and (g) It provides intrinsically motivating techniques. In short, it is an effective program for the teaching of listening and speaking in our large EFL classrooms.

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